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SUBJECT: BURMA'S FORMER POLITICAL PRISONERS PERSEVERE

Classified By: P/E Chief Leslie Hayden for Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Years in Burmese prisons have not dampened the will of many political prisoners to work within the country to promote change. Despite a tough adjustment period to life on the outside, former prisoners once active in the pro-democracy movement still hold tightly to their beliefs. Some remain involved in politics, while others now dedicate themselves to social welfare projects to help others and spread pro-democracy messages. Those who have become less politically active assert their willingness to go back to prison again if their activities had a good chance of bringing change to Burma. Post offers the former prisoners some support; we should do more. End summary.

Adjusting to Life Outside Prison

¶2. (C) P/E intern and FSNs interviewed 15 Rangoon-based former political prisoners in July and August 2006 to get a picture of their post-prison life in Burma. Most had high expectations for what life will be like on the outside. While most expatriates here see Burma as stagnant and deteriorating, former prisoners considered their country rapidly transformed since they went to prison. They cited as an example: City Mart, a chain of relatively modern supermarkets in Rangoon, which would be considered spartan by Giant and Safeway shoppers.

¶3. (C) The reaction of family and friends to their release has discouraged many of the former prisoners. Older relatives warn them, "Please don't be bad again or you will be sent back to prison," a crushing blow to political activists who believed they went to prison for a just cause and now are told they did something "bad" by those close to them. Many of their old friends seem to have forgotten them, and no one wanted to discuss politics with them. Every prisoner with whom emboffs spoke still holds tightly to the beliefs that sent him or her to prison in the first place. Myat San (PROTECT), a well-known 1988 student activist who now focuses on social welfare projects, tells his close friends, "It's OK if you forget about me, but don't forget

the reason I went to prison."

¶4. (C) Although prison life in Burma is extremely harsh, several former political prisoners said that outside world pressure felt even more intense. After three or four months almost everyone wants to go back to prison, where many were among activist colleagues and had a status in prison society above criminal prisoners. Some drew on their prior experience as political activists to negotiate with prison authorities and demand rights on behalf of all prisoners. Ko Jimmy (PROTECT), a former political prisoner who remains active in politics, said that Burmese prison is like a microcosm of Burmese society; learning how to deal with prison authorities taught him new strategies to oppose the regime. Many developed close connections with other activists in prison, upon whom they now rely for networking and moral support.

¶5. (C) Those prisoners who best adapted to prison life used the opportunity to learn from others. For example, some prisoners used their long sentences to master English, taught clandestinely by fellow inmates. Younger activists housed with older politicians learned more about the history of the democracy movement in Burma and the experiences of earlier activists. One woman sent to prison while in the 9th grade taught herself how to make greeting cards from dried beans and seeds, and now plans to start her own greeting card business on the outside.

¶6. (C) The Embassy's American Center offers a safe place for activists to meet one another, reestablish old friendships, make new connections, and network. Several former prisoners said that they met fellow activists whom they had not seen

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for years at the American Center. Student activists also use social occasions, such as wedding ceremonies and funerals of mutual acquaintances, to network.

Mental Health Care Needed

¶7. (C) An informal network of former political prisoners reach out to their colleagues three to four months after release, when the pressure of adjusting becomes most intense.

Those who do not receive emotional support in this phase usually drop out of social contact and do not return to school or activities beneficial to themselves or society. According to Dr. Ma Thida, a well-known former prisoner, those who expected in advance to go to prison because of their political activities were mentally prepared for the ordeal and have the easiest adjustment period after prison. Others suffer from illnesses and injuries sustained in prison and battle serious depression. A few former prisoners have committed suicide. When a case is extremely serious, the network of former prisoners refer their colleague to the only psychologist in Burma willing to treat political prisoners, but only in secret.

¶8. (C) Moral support is not enough; many need professional help. Former political prisoners said mental health is a bigger obstacle in their return to normal life than physical ailments, and that the lack of access to mental health care is a serious concern. The Embassy provided some assistance in February 2006 when Dr. J.F. Brodlie visited Burma for two weeks as a U.S. Speaker. He offered group therapy and individual counseling sessions to former political prisoners at the American Center, and workshops for health care professionals at the Muslim Free Clinic. Former prisoners who attended the group therapy and individual counseling sessions requested more programs of that nature, particularly one-on-one sessions with mental health professionals, who could help evaluate their current mental conditions and organize programs that would include family members.

Limited Access to Other Healthcare

¶9. (C) Most prisoners immediately seek a medical check-up, but they have few resources and many doctors feel pressure not to treat political prisoners. One eye specialist, who quietly treated former prisoners free of charge, was asked to leave by the owner of the clinic where he worked after his volunteer services were discovered. The Muslim Free Hospital, where Dr. Tin Myo Win and former political prisoner Dr. Ma Thida volunteer, is the only place in Rangoon where most former political prisoners can receive healthcare. According to former prisoners, the Muslim Free Hospital only handles non-complicated health problems and does not offer any dental or eye care, two of the most common (and expensive) problems former political prisoners face. Many, including student leader Min Ko Naing, also suffer from neurological problems, which require diagnosis by specialists not available at the Muslim Free Hospital, as well as expensive medications. As a result, Min Ko Naing relies on herbal remedies. Many of the former prisoners expressed apprehension that if regime officials pressured the Hospital administrators to stop treating former political prisoners, most would be left without any access to healthcare. The fear is not unfounded. The Director of the Hospital regularly gets questioned by police and military officials.

Studying for the Future

¶10. (C) The biggest obstacles preventing former political prisoners from returning to academic studies interrupted by their imprisonment are tuition costs and the "generation gap" between former prisoners, many now in their late 30's and 40's, and younger students. Most former prisoners prefer informal study of English or computers rather than return to

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Burma's state-controlled university system. As almost all private schools are too expensive for them, the best options in Rangoon are the Embassy's American Center and the British Council. As word of the programs spread, more former prisoners enrolled. Several former political prisoners said that they only went back to class when they learned that their friends were as well. In so doing they hope to prevent the "generation gap" between them and younger students from becoming too wide to bridge.

¶11. (C) The American Center offers more than just English classes. We also teach about the fundamental concepts of democracy and human rights, as well as providing critical thinking and debating skills. The former prisoners would like to form a network of activists to document and address human rights abuses inside Burma. At their request, Post will use visiting U.S. Speaker Richard Claude, an expert in human rights training, to develop teaching materials and case studies that can be used for continuing training on human rights at the American Center and by the activists in their communities.

¶12. (C) Several former prisoners attend classes at the American Center taking advantage of scholarship programs for former prisoners. Former political prisoner and student leader Min Ko Naing told emboffs that political prisoners get little respect from others in society, which contributes to their low self-esteem. One woman who was imprisoned for seven years said her scholarship from the American Center gave her confidence and the feeling that her sacrifices were recognized in a way they had not been by her friends and family. As word has spread of the scholarships, we have received allegations that the scholarships have been awarded to those closely connected to prominent student or NLD leaders rather than the most in need. Many current American Center students encourage us to expand the scholarship program, while acknowledging the need for screening to keep out regime informers.

¶13. (C) Of the fifteen former prisoners emboffs interviewed, only Myat San (PROTECT) decided to return to his university

and complete his degree studies interrupted in 1988. He said that a military intelligence officer follows him to and from class every day. On the first day of classes, the class professor and many younger students asked why he had been away from school for so long, assuming he had been abroad. When they realized he had been a political prisoner, they asked him if he had ever worked with Bo Aung Kyaw, who was a famous student activist in the 1920s. In his view, the question was a telling sign about the level of ignorance young Burmese have of their own history today. In Myat San's opinion, the authorities allowed him to return to school because they feel confident that the older student activists have no influence over the younger generation. All four of the four former political prisoners with whom we had in-depth discussions about education agreed that the regime would allow them to return to Burmese universities if they wished, an indication the regime confidently believes it has the upper hand over the students.

"Lost" Activists

¶14. (C) An important segment of former political prisoners have been overlooked: the low income workers, including street vendors and tri-shaw drivers, who played an essential role in the pro-democracy uprising in 1988. Daily wage workers, they said, actively supported the pro-democracy movement and were included in almost every political trial in the late 1980's and early 1990's. While the low-income workers did not have leadership roles, they disseminated information, helped with grassroots organizing, and supported student activities. The former prisoners estimated that at least 20 percent of political prisoners came from this low-income group; students and opposition politicians made up

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60 percent of political prisoners; middle class professionals comprised about 5-10 percent; and the balance were monks. These low-income workers/political prisoners have not received the support that the political activists. While most still hold true to their political beliefs, their main concern is survival. According to former prisoners, some low-income former prisoners leave the country soon after release to become migrant workers in Thailand.

The Former Prisoner's Role in Society

¶15. (C) Most former political prisoners through inner strength and the support of their fellow political prisoners have successfully handled the pressures of life after prison. Several prisoners attributed this to "good luck," as well as friends and associates who encouraged them and informed them about new educational opportunities. Some have returned to opposition politics; others focus on helping others through apolitical social welfare projects; a few combine both. Those who avoid direct involvement in politics at this time explained that their involvement in community development projects, such as volunteer teaching or working with HIV/AIDS patients, enable them to build up trust with the public and spread the message of democracy in a more low-key way. Many maintain ties with activists directly involved with political issues and said they would be willing to join them if the timing were right. While they did not want to go back to prison for something "small," they would gladly do so if their activities had a good chance of bringing democratic change to Burma.

¶16. (C) Former prisoners provided several examples of the types of programs that would benefit themselves and society. They are interested in learning more about computers, as well as programs on NGO management, conflict resolution, community organizing, and human rights. Several suggested a very basic human rights program be developed for a broader audience. The students said that one problem in getting people in Burma to stand up and defend their rights is that many do not know what their rights are or how to ask. In prison, they said, some student prisoners studied the jailers' manual to learn

their rights, and then demanded that prison authorities respect them. One former prisoner said that she was recently riding on a Rangoon city bus that was traveling too fast. No other passengers were willing to act, and some were laughing or ignoring the dangerous situation. The former prisoner was angry and told the driver to slow down or she would report him to his superiors; he promptly did. "The laughing passengers," she said, "are symbolic of what is wrong with Burma. People are not afraid when they should be, and they are afraid when they shouldn't be. On the bus, people faced a real danger, but they were more afraid of speaking up to a person in a position of authority than of getting in an accident."

¶15. (C) COMMENT: Many political activists in Burma emerge from prison ready pick up where they left off, and some have returned to the front-lines in the battle for democracy. The regime's intimidation tactics keep most Burmese fearful and reluctant to get anywhere near politics or political activists. Yet there are many who lost everything once, endured torture in prison, who will risk their futures to bring about peaceful change. Our programs at the American Center have provided some low-key training and opportunities to network. The regime watches the American Center closely, yet permits our programs to continue. We should do more: bring in psychiatric experts; bring in more speakers on their priority topics; provide medicine to those in need; and develop broader-based programs on human rights that activists can use inside Burma. End comment.

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